

What contribution is the Common Service making to community engagement and accountability in the Rohingya response?

Evaluation of the Common Service for Community Engagement & Accountability for the Rohingya Response, April 2019

Conducted by BBC Media Action Research & Learning Group, Bangladesh

Executive summary

“The Common Service is a complementary service without which we would fail. It played a critical role in the success of our community awareness campaign, helping us with language and terminology, understanding community needs, and rumours and how the community perceive things.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

Since late 2017, when an estimated 745,000 Rohingya refugees arrived in Bangladesh, BBC Media Action, Internews and Translators without Borders (TWB) have been working as a consortium to implement the ‘Common Service for community engagement and accountability for the Rohingya refugee response’. The Common Service aims to strengthen humanitarian agencies’ accountability and community engagement efforts in the response through several interlinked initiatives.

While the evaluation of the first phase of the Common Service¹ in July 2018 prioritised quantitative community level research, this second evaluation, which interviewed 25 humanitarian staff, is qualitative and focuses on understanding the impact of the Common Service on the work of practitioners and organisations responding to the crisis.

Improved access to information for Rohingya refugees

Community-level studies have found that significant progress has been made in terms of the provision of information to Rohingya refugees living in the camps. In an information needs assessment carried out at the beginning of 2019², 92% of Rohingya refugees said they have enough information to make decisions about their daily lives. This has increased from 23% in a similar study conducted at the beginning of the crisis in October 2017³. However significant gaps still remain. The same report found that refugees still experience confusion about how to access services and meet basic needs, and the lack of information about their future is resulting in uncertainty and spread of rumours.

Addressing challenges with community feedback mechanisms

The humanitarian response in Cox’s Bazar has seen agencies make great efforts to set up effective feedback mechanisms to improve accountability to the affected population. A June 2018 study found that 93% of organisations operating in the Rohingya response collect feedback from the community in one way or another⁴. However, although a lot of information is being collected, the recent information needs assessment found that 40% of Rohingya refugees still say they cannot talk to aid providers about their needs, ask them questions or tell them if they have complaints. This has reduced significantly from 62% in 2017, but challenges remain, particularly for women and older people, who are often less able to access feedback mechanisms due to restricted movement outside the home. By having a gender and age-balanced team of Rohingya community correspondents who actively seek input from the community, the consortium has made deliberate efforts to address this, but there is a need to scale up this approach to reduce the gender gap further.

¹ BBC Media Action (September 2018): How effective is communication in the Rohingya Refugee Response? <http://www.shongjog.org.bd/news/i/?id=51a5b51b-3861-4b04-8e4d-0acc65a37b82>

² Internews (Jan-April 2019): Information needs assessment – Rohingya and host communities in Cox’s Bazar. Will be available online from 20 June 2019.

³ Internews (November 2017): Information needs assessment – Cox’s Bazar Bangladesh. Available: <https://internews.org/resource/information-needs-assessment-coxs-bazar-bangladesh>

⁴ Internews (June 2018) *Humanitarian feedback mechanisms in the Rohingya Response, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh*. Available: <http://www.shongjog.org.bd/news/i/?id=79351f1f-96cf-4648-8ba9-f58e0a1520ac>

Providing humanitarian to humanitarian support to staff at different levels

This evaluation found that products and services produced by the Common Service are widely used by practitioners working at different levels within the Rohingya response. The Common Service has trained 1,686 practitioners from 80 agencies (of the estimated 130+ agencies responding to the crisis); the numbers who have used other Common Service tools and products in their work is impossible to estimate. This study found that field level practitioners extensively use the audio-visual content and the Rohingya language glossary to engage and communicate with communities. They have participated in training sessions and set up listener groups, but have less time to read any of the bulletins produced by the consortium. These regular publications, which include community feedback summary [What Matters?](#), the [Flying News](#) rumour tracking bulletin, and [CXB Press Snapshot](#), are more likely to be read and shared by mid- and top-level practitioners.

Supporting better community engagement

This study found the Common Service is supporting practitioners to communicate with communities more effectively, and therefore has contributed to improved community engagement in the response. Field-level practitioners articulated how training had inspired them to set up listening groups and train their colleagues on communication skills; the glossary had helped them communicate on sensitive issues using words that Rohingya people understand; and the audio-visual content had helped them engage and share relevant and timely information with Rohingya communities. By making practitioners aware of communities' fears, priorities and concerns through the bulletins, agencies were able to think through how to communicate more effectively on these issues. For example, when *Flying News* drew attention to rumours about vaccinations which were spreading around the camps, agencies responded by training health workers to allay people's fears. Having communities' concerns published also enabled practitioners to advocate for response-wide communication when required, for example on issues such as repatriation.

Contributing to response-wide accountability

Accountability can only be achieved when humanitarian agencies are acting on community feedback and this has been recognised within the response overall. Successes are beginning to be seen in this area as agencies work to mainstream accountability mechanisms throughout their work in Cox's Bazar. The Common Service is contributing to this by continually drawing attention to community priorities and concerns, as humanitarian agencies are using this information to inform programme decisions. Although most agencies have their own feedback mechanisms in place, practitioners described how they use *What Matters?* to cross check what they are hearing through their own mechanisms, which then leads them to take action. Practitioners use *What Matters?* as evidence when advocating for changes to their own programmes, with partners and at response-wide level. Examples of where practitioners said community feedback published in *What Matters?* contributed to changes in the camps include the decision to distribute LPG gas for cooking and providing night lighting to improve security.

Independent, neutral, flexible

This study points to the value of having an independent, neutral platform, distinct from any of the delivery-focused agencies within the response, from which to amplify community voice. This makes community concerns and priorities more difficult for humanitarian agencies to ignore. Practitioners articulated the value of having an adaptive, flexible service which was able to support their communication efforts, in improving their programmes and therefore the response as a whole.

Recommendations for improvement include moving from informative to more entertaining audio visual content; breaking down feedback data to show community concerns in different camps; and disseminating *What Matters?* more widely, presenting on key issues at sector meetings.

Introduction

Since October 2017, an estimated 745,000 Rohingya refugees have arrived in Bangladesh, fleeing violence and persecution in Rakhine state, Myanmar. Almost 900,000 Rohingya refugees, including families who have been arriving since the late seventies, now live in Teknaf and Ukhia Upazillas, in Cox's Bazar. The majority live in 34 crowded camps spread across the area⁵. One and a half years after the October 2017 influx, basic assistance is being provided and living conditions in the camps have improved. However, the needs and priorities of Rohingya men, women and children living in the congested camps continue to change and evolve.

Significant progress has been made in the Rohingya response to date in terms of the provision of information to affected people. In an information needs assessment carried out at the beginning of 2019⁶, 92% of Rohingya refugees said they have enough information to make decisions about their daily lives. This has increased from 23% in a similar study conducted at the beginning of the crisis in October 2017⁷. However significant gaps still remain. The same report found that refugees still experience confusion about how to access services and meet basic needs, and the lack of information about their future options is resulting in uncertainty and spread of rumours.

Similarly, the importance of seeking and acting on community feedback has been recognised within the response overall and successes are beginning to be seen in this area as agencies work to mainstream accountability mechanisms throughout their work in Cox's Bazar. But the response has not yet achieved the level of systematised accountability desired and there are still significant gaps. The recent study found that 40% of Rohingya refugees still say they cannot talk to aid providers about their needs, ask them questions or tell them if they have complaints. This has reduced significantly from 62% in 2017, but challenges remain, particularly for women and older people, who are often less able to access feedback mechanisms due to restricted movement outside the home.

Project: Common Service for community engagement and accountability for Rohingya refugee response

Since late 2017, BBC Media Action, Internews and Translators without Borders have been working as a consortium to implement the Common Service for community engagement and accountability. The start-up phase of the project, which ran until July 2018, was funded by IOM, with backfunding from DFID and the US government. The second phase of the project, funded by both ECHO and DFID (with the latter's funds again flowing through IOM), ran from August 2018 until March 2019. This second phase is the focus of this evaluation.

How does the Common Service aim to strengthen community engagement and accountability in the Rohingya response?

It has long been recognised that humanitarian agencies have a responsibility to be accountable to the communities they aim to serve. The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) defines accountability as:

⁵Strategic Executive Group (January 2019) Joint response plan for Rohingya Refugee Crisis – January-December 2019. Available:

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2019_jrp_for_rohingya_humanitarian_crisis_compressed.pdf

⁶ Internews (Jan-April 2019): Information needs assessment – Rohingya and host communities in Cox's Bazaar. Will be available online from 20 June 2019.

⁷ Internews (November 2017): Information needs assessment – Cox's Bazar Bangladesh. Available: <https://internews.org/resource/information-needs-assessment-coxs-bazar-bangladesh>

*'The means through which power is used responsibly. It is a process of taking into account the views of, and being held accountable by, different stakeholders, and primarily the people affected by authority or power.'*⁸

It recognises that in humanitarian response there is a power imbalance, where communities affected by crisis often have no formal control or influence over the humanitarian agencies working to support them. The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability⁹ (CHS) sets out nine commitments that humanitarian agencies should make to communities affected by crisis. Two of these commitments are specifically focused on community engagement and accountability:

- CHS Four: Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.
- CHS Five: Communities and people affected by crisis have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints.

Humanitarian agencies operating in Cox's Bazar each have their own methods of sharing information and engaging with Rohingya and host communities, and collecting and dealing with community feedback and complaints.

The Common Service does not aim to replace agencies individual mechanisms, but aims to strengthen accountability and community engagement efforts across the Rohingya response, through several interlinked initiatives, by:

- Improving Rohingya and host communities' access to reliable and useful information, based on a strong understanding of their information and communication needs
- Supporting practitioners to engage and communicate with Rohingya communities more effectively, in a language they understand
- Providing an independent platform through which to analyse community feedback and publish Rohingya communities' needs, concerns and priorities for humanitarian agencies to act upon.

Project objectives

Under this phase of the project, the objectives are summarised as follows:

Principal objective:

A coordinated approach for communication with communities in their preferred language promotes life-saving behaviours and improves access to services. Consolidated approaches to feedback collection and data sharing ensure effective accountability to affected populations.

Specific objective:

Improvements in coordinated, timely and responsive two-way community engagement with and systematic accountability to affected people in their preferred language.

Project activities

The Common Service has been providing a range of specialist, technical support services to sectors and agencies within the response, as well as the Communicating with Communities Working Group (CwC) and other subgroups and task forces.

⁸ Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (2010) *The 2010 HAP Standard in Accountability and Quality Measurement*. Available: <https://www.chsalliance.org/files/files/Resources/Standards/2010-hap-standard-in-accountability.pdf>

⁹CHS Alliance, Group URD and Sphere Project (2014) *The Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability*. Available: <https://corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>

With the aim of improving humanitarian agencies' engagement with communities and Rohingya communities' access to information, the Common Service has produced a significant number of Rohingya [language tools](#) and [audio-visual communication tools](#); and provided training in communicating with communities, in running listening groups, in data management, Rohingya language and culture, and humanitarian interpretation to humanitarian and media agencies. It has initiated the regular [Bala Bura narrowcast](#) and [Flying News rumour-tracking bulletin](#) to help humanitarian practitioners understand and combat rumours spreading through the camps through providing accurate information to communities. It has also produced a biweekly [summary of local news coverage](#) to help practitioners understand how issues related to the crisis are being covered in the local media.

With the aim of increasing transparency and improving accountability, it has also been operating a collective feedback analysis service, collating and analysing data from different sources and producing a fortnightly [What Matters?](#) bulletin, which also includes summaries of the service's sociolinguistic research. By regularly publishing the Rohingya communities' needs, concerns and priorities from a neutral platform, and disseminating this information to humanitarian practitioners, the Common Service aims to incite agencies to act on this information and adapt their programmes to better meet communities' needs.

In this phase of the project, four reports were also published as part of the new [Foresight Service](#), which aims to help humanitarian practitioners consider community concerns, views and opinions when planning for some of the key challenges facing the Rohingya response in 2019. This service is not included in this evaluation as the reports were published after fieldwork was completed. The activities that form the Common Service are outlined in the diagram below.



Research study

Research background

An evaluation of the Common Service¹⁰ was conducted at the end of the start-up phase in July 2018. This included a quantitative survey with 750 participants from the Rohingya community and 750 participants from the host community, as well as nine key informant interviews with humanitarian practitioners. The community-level study used the [Information Needs Assessment carried out in Cox's Bazar](#) in October 2017 as a baseline, and found that Rohingya people's access to information had increased since they first arrived in Bangladesh – 84% of Rohingya men and women interviewed in July 2018 said they had enough information to make good decisions for themselves and their families compared with 23% in October 2017, and three quarters (75%) said it had become easier to get information over the previous six months.

The July 2018 evaluation study also found evidence to suggest that humanitarian and media agencies were using the tools and services produced as part of the Common Service to help them communicate with the Rohingya and host communities. However, the study was not able to solicit enough response from practitioners to draw strong evidence about how they were using the tools and information produced by the Common Service, and what impact this was having on their work.

Research methodology

Research scope

The previous evaluation of the Common Service prioritised community level research, but was limited in understanding impacts at practitioner and organisation level. It was therefore decided this current evaluation should be qualitative in nature and focus on understanding the impact of the Common Service on the work of practitioners and organisations responding to the Rohingya crisis. As the project is planned to continue, there was a focus on understanding how the Common Service tools and services can be improved, as well as looking at impact.

Research aims and objectives

This evaluation aimed to understand whether and how humanitarian agencies had improved their engagement with communities, and what role Common Service activities had played in this.

The objectives of the evaluation were:

- 1) To understand whether and how Common Service tools and services are being used by humanitarian agencies to communicate with Rohingya and host communities
- 2) To understand whether and how humanitarian agencies have changed the way they communicate with Rohingya and host communities as a result of Common Service activities
- 3) To understand any barriers faced by humanitarian agencies in using Common Service tools or advice and how to mitigate those in future
- 4) To understand whether and how humanitarian agencies have adapted their project activities as a result of community feedback, and what role the Common Service has played in this

The consortium was required to report on the following two quantitative indicators as part of the evaluation:

- Number of sectors and agencies who report making use of CwC Common Service tools or advice (Target value: 40)

¹⁰ BBC Media Action (September 2018): How effective is communication in the Rohingya Refugee Response? <http://www.shongjog.org.bd/news/i/?id=51a5b51b-3861-4b04-8e4d-0acc65a37b82>

- Number of agencies who report that feedback and accountability mechanisms have led to adaptations in response activities (Target value: 20)

Methodology

Two methods were used to collect data for this qualitative evaluation:

Online survey

In order to be able to report on the quantitative indicators, a short online survey was circulated to practitioners on mailing lists of all Common Service products, as well as the CwC working group and other relevant mailing lists.

To keep the online survey simple and focused, and therefore more likely to solicit responses, it focused on the three bulletins which were produced by the Common Service: *What Matters*, *Flying News rumour bulletin* and *CXB Press Snapshot*. It collected information from participants on their awareness, use and sharing of the bulletins, as well as whether their organisation did anything differently as a result of reading the information in the bulletins.

In-depth interviews with practitioners

In-depth interviews were carried out with 25 practitioners from humanitarian agencies and sectors responding to the crisis.

As the aim of these interviews was to understand more about what kind of changes practitioners and organisations had made, and how; a purposive sampling strategy was used. Practitioners were invited to participate on the basis that they, or staff from their organisation, had received training or support from one of the consortium partners as part of the Common Service. A list of organisations who participated in the study is available in the appendix. Efforts were made to include a mix of field level practitioners working with communities in the camps, and mid to top level practitioners working in management level positions.

Field level practitioners	10 in depth interviews
Mid-top level practitioners	15 in depth interviews
TOTAL	25 in depth interviews

Challenges and limitations

Challenges and limitations of the study were as follows:

- The online survey only received 13 responses from 11 organisations, despite follow up emails and phone calls from consortium staff members. In-depth interviews with practitioners were also difficult to set up, indicating that staff working on the Rohingya response are very busy and find it difficult to give up their time to participate in research.
- This study used selective sampling to find practitioners who had been exposed to Common Service products or services. Although this study is able to provide a minimum number of humanitarian agencies who are using the Common Service products or services, it is not able to give an indication of how widely they are being used by other agencies who did not participate in the study.
- As the Common Service aims to enhance agencies' existing work and practices, it is challenging to isolate the impact the Common Service has had on community engagement and accountability across the whole response. Attempts have been made to understand the contribution the Common Service has made through triangulating data from different sources.

- It is challenging to measure the impact of the project which has been consistently adaptive to the needs of the humanitarian response, covering a broad range of issues and incorporating many different initiatives. Tools and products have been developed quickly based on need, and disseminated for everyone to use, making it difficult to capture the contribution they have made overall.
- Practitioners are rarely exposed to all the initiatives, and therefore can only comment on the parts of the project they have been exposed to. If they have not worked on previous humanitarian responses, practitioners will not be able to compare with a scenario where no such services exist.

Findings

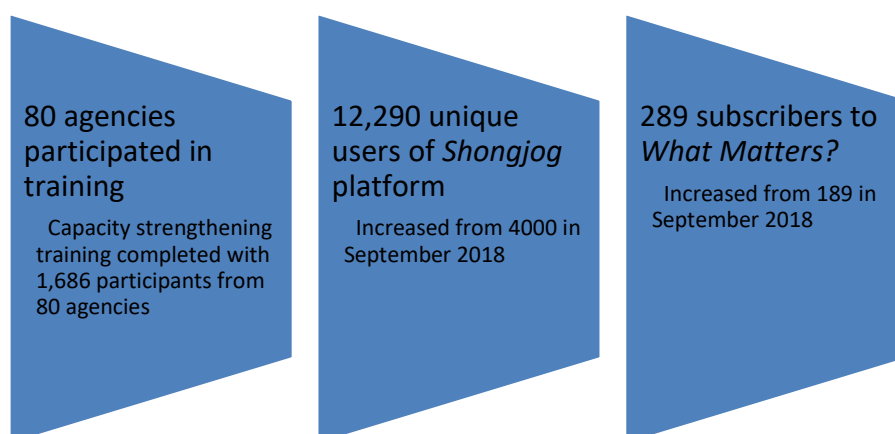
Logframe indicators

The logframe indicators have been reported on using combined data from the online survey and the in depth interviews with practitioners, as well as project logs. Descriptive detail and examples can be found in the text below.

	Target	Total (including online survey & interviews with practitioners)
Number of sectors and agencies who report making use of CwC Common Service tools or advice	40	80 agencies ¹¹
Number of agencies who report that feedback and accountability mechanisms have led to adaptations in response activities	20	18 ¹²

There are at least 130 agencies responding to the Rohingya crisis, meaning that more than half of responding agencies have been trained by the Common Service or made use of Common Service tools, products and services.

How are Common Service tools, products and services being used by humanitarian practitioners to communicate with communities?



¹¹ Common Service training logs show that capacity strengthening training has been provided to 1,686 participants from 80 agencies, indicating that at least 80 agencies have used Common Service tools or advice.

¹² These figures include organisations where at least one staff member from the organisation either: reported in the online survey that their organisation had done something differently as a result of reading one of the Common Service bulletins ; or reported in an in depth interview that their organisation had adapted project activities as a result of community feedback.

The Common Service was appreciated by practitioners for being an adaptive service which enhanced their programmes

Practitioners who had worked closely with the Common Service, or with the agencies who made up the consortium, appreciated the support they were able to offer, which they did not have the skills or capacity to do internally. They acknowledged that this support improved their work.

“The Common Service is a complementary service without which we would fail. It played a critical role in the success of our community awareness campaign, helping us with language and terminology, understanding community needs, and rumours and how the community perceive things.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

“Common Service initiatives worked very well as the organisations got support on time whenever they need it, it is always available for them. Donors need to support common service initiatives like this because it is not possible for a single organisation to create the scenario that the Common Service provided. This support should be continuing as the Common Service helped all our programmes to succeed.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

Common Service tools, products and services are widely known about and used within the response

Practitioners felt that common service tools and services were well known about, and all the practitioners from the 25 organisations who participated in the study (i.e. were interviewed or completed the online survey) reported using at least one of the Common Service tools, products or services in their work.

Different products and services are used by staff operating at different levels within organisations

There is a difference in which tools, products and services are used by which practitioners. Field level practitioners had attended training sessions; downloaded and used audio-visual content with communities, and used the Rohingya language glossary. Mid to top level staff were more likely to read *What Matters?*, *Flying News* or *CXB Press Snapshot* bulletins, share relevant issues with their teams, and use the information to advocate for changes within their organisation, or at sector level.

The Shongjog website is well known and used as a communication resource hub by staff operating at all levels within organisations, and by all sectors.

Almost all the practitioners interviewed had visited the *Shongjog* website, which is used by the consortium to provide a repository of audio-visual resources as well as research reports and other community engagement and accountability-related tools. Practitioners viewed it as the main source of content to help them communicate with Rohingya communities on priority issues. Most visited it to download audio-visual content, and some had visited the site to download the Rohingya language glossary tool. Practitioners said they found out about it either through one of the training sessions, or because it was discussed at the Communicating with Communities (CwC) working group. Practitioners appreciated that audio-visual content was made according to need, and therefore was timely and used by practitioners working across all sectors. The number of unique users of the website has increased from 4,000 in September 2018 to 12,290 at end of May 2019, indicating that increasing numbers of practitioners are using the resources available.

“We use the Shongjog platform for all kinds of purposes, as there is lots of good material available for all sectors to use. Shongjog is the main source of communication materials within the Rohingya crisis.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

“We use your materials [from Shongjog] for our listening groups as we have a large number of listening groups within the camps.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

Most top- and mid-level practitioners know about the *What Matters?* and *Flying News* bulletins and find them to be useful initiatives which are shared and discussed within teams.

The fortnightly bulletin, *What Matters?*, which summarises community feedback from a wide range of sources; and the *Flying News* bulletin, which provides accurate information to target rumours circulating in the camp, were widely known about and used by practitioners in the study. Management level staff read the bulletins and share them with their teams if they think the information is relevant. Field level staff are less likely to be aware of the bulletins, or do not have time to read them frequently. *CXB Press Snapshot*, which provides a fortnightly summary of how Rohingya related news is being covered in the local newspapers, was less widely known about by practitioners in this study. However, the bulletin was useful to foreign staff who can't read Bangla, and those who read it find it useful particularly to understand the perceptions of the host community.

“What Matters? is very useful. It always tries to emphasise key issues and focus on what should be prioritised in the response. It gives a clear idea of the present context in the camps.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

“Flying news is very useful for my colleagues who work in the camp because there are a lot of rumours flying around.” Humanitarian practitioner, field level

“The CXB press snapshot is useful from a security and a communications perspective. It's good to know what the key issues are which people are discussing. Because sometimes the discussion humanitarians are having around issues like repatriation and relocation are a bit isolated from the discussion the local media has around the same topics. It's especially useful for me as I can't read Bangla.” Humanitarian practitioner, top-mid level

Capacity strengthening training has been provided to 80 agencies responding to the crisis.

BBC Media Action, Internews and Translators without Borders have all run training with humanitarian practitioners under the Common Service. Much of this training was bespoke, designed specifically for particular agencies, and tailored for staff operating at field, middle and higher management levels. Training topics included Communicating with Communities (CwC), interpersonal communication, rumour tracking, accountability, Rohingya cultural awareness, language training, data analysis and management, listening group formation, facilitation, and humanitarian interpreter training. In total 1,686 practitioners working on the Rohingya response were trained. All the field level practitioners interviewed for this study had participated in at least one training activity run by the consortium.

“The trainings are helpful especially for emergency preparedness and it also helped us to build the skills like interpersonal communication and listening groups as these are new for us. The cyclone preparedness training has been consistently helpful for us.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

Field level practitioners use and share the Rohingya language glossary and insights on Rohingya language and culture to improve communication with the community Chittagonian-speaking practitioners said they use the glossary to cross-check words and understand the best field-tested terminology to use to communicate with Rohingya people about certain issues, particularly sensitive protection issues which are difficult to talk about. This knowledge is shared between colleagues. Mid-level staff often share the language section in the *What Matters?* bulletin with field level staff to help them improve communication with the Rohingya community.

“We have a WhatsApp group where trained Information Management Officers communicate with me, and they ask if they don’t understand any Rohingya words. If I know the word, I tell them. If not, I check the word from the dictionary [glossary] as soon as possible and communicate with them.” – Humanitarian practitioner, field level

Practitioners were not always aware that tools, services and content were made as part of the Common Service.

Practitioners working in management level positions had usually heard of the Common Service and had heard of many of the tools and services, but sometimes didn’t realise they were created by the consortium. Staff working at field level had often not heard of the Common Service and were only aware of training sessions they had attended, or had read one or more of the bulletins, as recommended by their managers.

How has the Common Service contributed to improved engagement with Rohingya communities?

Practitioners at all levels felt Common Service tools and services have helped them communicate with Rohingya communities better. Field level staff articulated the value of having relevant content available in the right language to share with communities, as well as guidance on Rohingya language and sociocultural communication preferences.

Mid- and top-level staff talked more about being aware of the community’s concerns and therefore being better equipped to communicate appropriately with them on these issues.

This study found that the Common Service has contributed to improving communication and engagement with Rohingya communities in the following ways:

1) Making relevant, timely audio and visual content in the right language available has helped practitioners engage communities and overcome language barriers

Having access to new, relevant audio and visual material has been critical for field level staff running information hubs and engaging people in listening groups and other activities at community centres.

All the field-level practitioners interviewed in the study reported sharing audio or visual content with Rohingya communities, either at listening groups or during awareness sessions at community centres. They use flash cards, play audio programmes or narrowcasts and show videos. Most download the content from *Shongjog*, while some have been provided with the content directly from consortium partners.

Practitioners felt it helped them communicate across language barriers, and they got positive feedback from the Rohingya community, particularly when they showed videos. The fact that content is developed based on community needs means that practitioners working in different sectors can use it.

“The Shongjog content helps us deal with contemporary issues – using the audio visual content and the flashcards enhances our engagement with the community.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

Some practitioners felt the content boosted their credibility: they felt community members trusted what they were saying as a result of seeing the videos or listening to the audio. Some also

mentioned that when new content was not uploaded, they struggled to engage people in listening groups with old content, highlighting the value of content being current and relevant.

“I conducted a session with pregnant Rohingya women and showed them the video about how to care for yourself in pregnancy. They were impressed. I think if I had tried to counsel them alone, without the video, they might not have trusted what I said so much. When we can counsel and show contents together it’s much more effective.” Humanitarian practitioner, field level

This study has highlighted the need for both audio and visual content, as practitioners have been using them in different situations. They found audio content easy to play to large groups, using a small speaker. It was more difficult to organise screenings of video content for large groups due to lack of space and facilities in the camps, although they found the visual content engaged audiences for longer.

“[The audio content] is very useful as we don’t have the resources or capacity to make it ourselves. It is multi-sectoral and cross-cutting, covering a wide range of topics and different target groups. Therefore it’s much broader, takes consideration of needs, takes consideration of categories, different priorities, which means I find it a good resource which we want to use within the community.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

2) Raising awareness about differences in Rohingya language and culture has improved how practitioners communicate with the Rohingya community

Research undertaken by the Common Service has informed responding agencies about the differences between the Rohingya language and the Chittagonian dialect. The language section in *What Matters?* was appreciated by many practitioners, as it provided in-depth insight into the Rohingya language, and this information was not obtainable elsewhere. Mid-level staff would often share this information with field level staff who speak Chittagonian.

“The thing I like most about What Matters? is the language bit, which is really rich in Rohingya people’s language. That’s very different. There is a real need of understanding that Chittagonian and Rohingya language is similar enough but they are with different cultures, different histories, and different practices.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

Practitioners mentioned the value of training they had received on communicating in Rohingya language, particularly using certain terminology.

“The language training was really helpful for my staff in terms of how to communicate with communities, which specific terms to use and how to engage the community better. All the officer level staff who attended the training are using the words in their day to day work, and developing themselves in terms of communication.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

They appreciated the practical Rohingya language glossary, and would use it to cross check words, and understand the best words to use to communicate with Rohingya people, particularly on sensitive issues. This knowledge was shared between colleagues.

“Gender-related terms from their dictionary [glossary] have been very useful for us in terms of connecting with communities in WASH and protection issues. Lots of the staff do not talk in Rohingya language, they talk Chittagonian and the dictionary helps them to communicate. There is some terminology related to protection that is very difficult to communicate with community people, such

as rape and sexual violence. The gender-related glossary helped us a lot.” – Humanitarian practitioner, top-level

3) Listening Group training has inspired and supported the set up of listening groups and other community engagement activities

Most practitioners interviewed for the study had either participated in listening group training, or staff from their organisations had participated in the training, and all their agencies had gone on to set up listening groups in the camps. The idea of setting up listening groups to share information through audio programmes was new to many of the agencies. Participants said the training helped them consider how to set up a listening group, and introduced them to *Shongjog* where they could find new and relevant content to play to participants.

“These radio listening groups are new to us. We started them after there were questions around registration and the MOU between UNDP, UNHCR and government last year. Then, the Common Service through Internews did a narrowcast in the camps and we saw the impact of using a narrowcast and having listening groups. After that, we introduced listening groups in every camp and now we want them to be more institutionalised.” – Humanitarian practitioner, top-level

As of the end of March 2019, there are now an estimated 623 listening groups operating in the camps. They provide an ongoing opportunity to share important information with members of the Rohingya community, who, we know from our previous research¹³, share this information with their family and neighbours. Listening groups are also an important source of community feedback which is collated, analysed and contributes to the issues highlighted in *What Matters?*.

“After receiving the training, I got a clear idea of what a radio listening group is, how it works, what are the benefits of it, how to integrate it with our activity plan. I also realised that a radio listening group is a good way to reach more people. This has impacted on all of my activities because people are getting entertainment and information at the same time.” - Humanitarian practitioner, field level

Practitioners found the training particularly useful in helping them consider how to communicate with listening group participants.

“In the listening group training, we did an activity to evaluate how we communicate with people, so the trainers could recommend where improvement is needed. From this [roleplay], we came to learn that we need to give more space to community people to listen to each other, instead of questioning randomly.” – Humanitarian practitioner, field level

4) Community engagement training has improved individuals' communication skills but also developed a cadre of practitioners who are conducting community engagement training within their own organisations

Field level practitioners felt community engagement training had improved the way they communicate with Rohingya communities, through learning about general communication skills, rumour management, the correct terminology to use, and becoming aware of tools such as audio-visual materials and the language glossary

¹³ BBC Media Action (September 2018): How effective is communication in the Rohingya Refugee Response? <http://www.shongjog.org.bd/news/i/?id=51a5b51b-3861-4b04-8e4d-0acc65a37b82>

“Communicating with communities training was really useful for the field staff. From the training, they got to learn how to communicate and behave better with the community.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

In some organisations, these participants went on to train colleagues within their organisations on effective community engagement.

“Our organisation has ongoing training sessions where there is a section on enhancing the communication skills of community volunteers. These sessions are now conducted by the field level supervisors who participated in the common service community engagement training. A gradual change can be seen as the community volunteers are now communicating very well, and they are improving day by day.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

The Common Service ran dedicated Training of Trainers (ToT) courses, to support practitioners who wanted to train others. One ToT participant explained it was very valuable to her as she learned how to organise a training, which she is planning to do soon for her team. It helped her think through how to plan a session, what to focus on, how to interact with the participants, and the importance of group work. The feedback she received within the training was helpful to her. The fact that the training was over two days meant they had enough time to learn and implement the knowledge they had gained.

5) Providing clear guidance and training on cyclone preparedness communication resulted in concrete action being taken by numerous organisations

Both field and mid-level practitioners appreciated the cyclone awareness communication materials and training provided by the Common Service, as it meant they were able to share clear information with the community and advise them using step by step information in the Rohingya language on what to do in the event of a cyclone. Some organisations used the guidance to train volunteers and community mobilisers, so they could raise awareness within their community. The materials and training were developed in conjunction with the government-led national Cyclone Preparedness Programme¹⁴.

“After the training we were able to share with the community about the safety issues, and about the steps they need to take if there is a cyclone. If they know these steps they will be able to save themselves. People feel interested in visual things. They have easily understood the instruction of preparedness by seeing the different colour and number of flags.” – Humanitarian practitioner, field level

“We printed 4000 copies of the cyclone awareness book for volunteers. This is now being used across all the camps to increase the awareness at household and group level.” – Humanitarian practitioner, high level.

6) Understanding Rohingya people’s fears, concerns and priorities means practitioners can try to address them head on through effective communication

¹⁴ UNDP, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, American Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (March, 2019) *Extreme weather and disaster preparedness in the Rohingya refugee response – 2018 Cyclone Preparedness Lessons Learnt*. Available: http://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/extreme-weather-and-disaster-preparedness-in-the-rohingya-refuge.html

Practitioners appreciated gaining an understanding about people’s concerns and fears, as it meant they could communicate more effectively with the community, particularly on sensitive issues.

For example, one practitioner explained that reading about Rohingya people’s fear of vaccinations in the *Flying News* bulletin meant they were able to alert their health teams about Rohingya people’s perceptions, and therefore how they could address these fears when engaging with the community.

“The rumour bulletin was useful to us, for example on how Rohingya people feel about vaccinations. It was useful because it came with concrete advice - how can they tackle this or how can a humanitarian organisation manage this. We were able to advise our health team when they talk about vaccination, these are the key issues that they should be talking about, and these are the rumours and perceptions they should be aware of.” - Humanitarian practitioner- mid-top level

Understanding Rohingya communities’ priorities and concerns helped practitioners understand which issues they needed to provide clear information on. One practitioner gave an example of consistently seeing cooking fuel issues coming up in *What Matters?*, which prompted him to seek accurate information from the energy and environment coordinator about the plan for LPG gas distribution, which his team could share with communities.

“Now we try to give information in response to burning questions which people have. We collect data on what issues people have concerns about from surveys, assessments, Flying News, What Matters? and so on. Based on what people are most concerned about, we gather information to give to them.” Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

Another practitioner explained that even if they were not able to meet communities’ needs, for example around LPG gas refills, at least they were aware of their concerns and were able to communicate with them about their agencies’ limitations.

“In some cases, changes are also just explaining to people why we have limitations.” – Humanitarian practitioner, top-mid level.

7) Publishing community concerns and priorities helps agencies to advocate for coordinated communication on response-wide issues

Having community concerns and priorities published on a regular basis helped practitioners advocate when coordinated communication was required. One practitioner explained that their agency developed messages about repatriation after reading about Rohingya community concerns in *What Matters?*, and were then able to use data from *What Matters?* to advocate with ISCG, UNHCR and the protection cluster for clear communication with the Rohingya community about repatriation issues.

“In October-November, based on feedback from the community regarding their concerns on repatriation, we were able to take the initiative for strong advocacy with the government, UNHCR and ISCG for information provision and community facing messages on the issue of repatriation.” – Humanitarian practitioner, online survey respondent.

The Common Service developed some communication products on behalf of the humanitarian response to meet communities’ information needs. This includes framing and publishing FAQs about elements of the humanitarian response (for example the [Cyclone Early Warning System](#)) for field level practitioners to use to answer communities’ questions. The service also translated information

about repatriation to Bhashanchar into simple Bangla, to help field level staff communicate with Rohingya communities on this issue.

“From What Matters? we came to know that Rohingya people were worried about Bhashanchar. That helped us to change our communication strategies. We scaled up our registration outreach when we heard that the community wants to know more information, because it was a sensitive issue and people felt insulted when we were asking them about registration. Therefore, we changed our communication style and try to make sure the government is involved when we are communicating about this, as it is a government issue.” – Humanitarian practitioner, top-level

How has the Common Service contributed to accountability, and Rohingya communities’ needs and priorities being met by responding agencies?

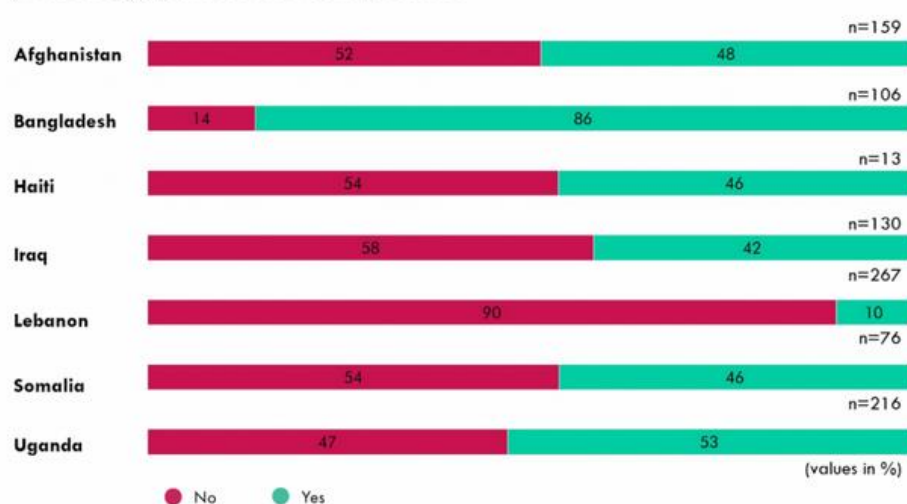
With the aim of improving accountability across the Rohingya response, the Common Service has been collating and analysing data from different agencies’ feedback mechanisms, from a network of community correspondents, from listening groups, and from bespoke research carried out with Rohingya communities on a weekly basis. Derived from ongoing analysis of this data, information about Rohingya communities’ priority concerns have been published in the fortnightly [What Matters?](#) bulletin for humanitarian agencies to act upon.

Rohingya people in the camps feel their complaints are being dealt with

Research by Ground Truth Solutions found that a much higher proportion of Rohingya people feel their feedback is being responded to, compared with people affected by crisis in other countries (see graph below).

BBC Media Action’s survey in July 2018 found that a quarter of Rohingya people said they had given feedback or made a complaint, and 82% of these people said they were satisfied with what happened next.

Affected people survey: Have you received a response to your suggestion or complaint?



Ground Truth Solutions (May 2019) *Time to act on what affected people tell us about humanitarian hotlines*. Available: <https://groundtruthsolutions.org/2019/05/06/time-to-act-on-what-affected-people-tell-us-about-humanitarian-hotlines/>

This section looks at how humanitarian agencies have used this information to help them meet communities' needs, and how this has contributed to improving accountability within the response.

The Common Service amplifies community voice through a neutral platform, providing a regular source of evidence of community priorities and concerns.

Practitioners felt that because *What Matters?* is a neutral platform, focused on prioritising community needs rather than specific sector issues, it is a credible source of information. *What Matters?*, *Flying News*, and research publications produced by the Common Service consortium, provided valuable evidence of communities' priorities and concerns on a regular basis.

"The bulletins help to give an assessment of how Rohingya people feel living in the camps. They confirm what people see in the camps, which helps a lot because it is a published document and information is portrayed at a broad level. Sometimes they provide information that humanitarian organisations may not have heard of, or it provides a different angle to that information, For example, one bulletin provided very specific information about what porda means to Rohingya women, which helped us to understand." – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

"I always circulate 'What Matters?' to the team leaders and officers. It gives us a general and broad picture of the community, and my team can find out what is going on in the camps and any specific issues being raised." – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

This reinforces what humanitarian practitioners are hearing through their own feedback mechanisms, leading them to advocate within their own agencies to take action.

Practitioners explained that they often recognise the feedback being published in *What Matters?* as they hear similar feedback from communities through their own mechanisms. Reading *What Matters?* provides them with the bigger picture, means they can cross check information, and reinforces their understanding of issues being raised by communities. They usually act on information which comes from multiple sources, so when they see issues coming up in *What Matters?* as well as through their own feedback mechanism, it gives them confidence that their feedback mechanisms are collecting accurate information and encourages them to take action. It provides evidence for them to advocate for action within their organisation or sector.

"We do not get information on health issues that the community are facing only from What Matters?. We also look at the health sector bulletins and our community feedback, and we come together with this information and strategise our next steps and design what types of campaign we need to launch to tackle the situation. What Matters? is a very necessary and valid source of information alongside other sources." Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

"Our MEAL team collects community feedback from the field. I always check if the data is similar to what is coming up in What Matters?" Humanitarian Practitioner, mid-level

One example which came up for multiple agencies was about cooking fuel. Practitioners were hearing communities' concerns about lack of cooking fuel through their own agencies' feedback mechanisms, but seeing these concerns also published in *What Matters?* helped them advocate within their own organisations to start distributing LPG gas as a solution.

"During data collection from the community, we asked Rohingya people about their most important requirements. The first was wood, and then gas. We checked the data was similar to what was in

What Matters?, and then we decided to give gas cylinders to the Rohingya people.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

“Feedback on fuel in What Matters? helped us advocate with our senior management to scale up our LPG programme” – Humanitarian practitioner, online survey participant

“We use a number of sources including the bulletins to improve our program. Firewood has been a protection issue for a very long time and the bulletins supplement the protection analysis by showing what the community was saying about firewood. This is all evidence-based advocacy to switch to LPG.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level.

“We made a few changes because of the common service feedback. There are many issues in the What Matters? bulletin around fuel sources. We found this issue through our own feedback mechanism, but it was still useful to have it in writing elsewhere. That’s why we started doing LPG programmes.” - Humanitarian practitioner, top-mid level.

“We changed the contents of our hygiene kits as people weren’t satisfied with the quality. We also piloted a cash intervention, in response to demand for cash assistance, and started distributing LPG gas for cooking based on community feedback.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-top level.

It has provided evidence for practitioners to advocate for change with other agencies and in the wider response.

Practitioners gave examples of issues within the camps which had been resolved as a result of advocacy around key issues being raised by communities, which *What Matters?* contributed to. For example, many of the camps now have street lights as a result of communities’ feedback about feeling unsafe, and LPG gas is now being distributed as a result of ongoing feedback about the lack of cooking fuel.

“Community people give feedback and complain. Depending on what the feedback is, we coordinate with the actor who works in the camp and solve the problem. For example, when we ran the protection-related program the community told us about the street lights, most of the camps have street lights now.” - Humanitarian practitioner, field level

“What Matters? is very helpful to have a short summary of what the key issues and key concerns from communities are in the camps. For example, I can remember that there was one issue on early marriage (issue 11) which is rising in the camps. We were able to use What Matters? to do some advocacy and used it as an external source to understand the community’s concerns.” – Humanitarian practitioner, top-mid level.

Practitioners explained that if they hear feedback which is not relevant to their own organisation, either through their own feedback mechanisms or through reading one of the bulletins, they discuss it with colleagues at a partner organisation or agency who would be able to act on the feedback. When this is published on a neutral platform, it makes it easier to raise issues with other agencies.

“The bulletins help us because it means our feedback mechanisms are not the only source of information. For example, if we hear that health workers are rude in the camps, if this is published in a bulletin I feel I can send it to my health colleagues as it is more objective, as it is coming from the community level.” – Humanitarian practitioner, mid-level

“One good example is regarding food services in both *What Matters?* and *Flying News*. People complained that a 30kg bag contains only 28kg. Even though we don't do rice distribution, we were able to address it with colleagues from WFP and site management.”- Humanitarian practitioner, top-mid level.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study found that Common Service products and services are widely known about and used by practitioners working for humanitarian agencies supporting Rohingya communities. Staff operating at different levels within organisations use different products and services. Field level practitioners who communicate face to face with Rohingya communities extensively use the audio-visual content, the Rohingya language glossary and have participated in training sessions, but have less time to read the bulletins, which are circulated by email. Mid- and top-level practitioners are more likely to read the bulletins and share useful information with staff, as well as organise training and point field level staff to audio-visual content and language resources.

There is clear evidence that the Common Service has supported practitioners to communicate with communities more effectively, and therefore has contributed to improved community engagement in the response. Field-level practitioners articulated how training had inspired them to set up listening groups and train their colleagues on communication skills; the glossary had helped them communicate on sensitive issues using words that Rohingya people prefer and understand; and the audio-visual content had helped them engage and share information with Rohingya communities. By making practitioners aware of communities' fears, priorities and concerns through *What Matters?* and *Flying News* bulletins, agencies were able to think through how to communicate more effectively on these issues, as well as advocate for response-wide action.

There is evidence to suggest that the Common Service has contributed to improving accountability across the Rohingya response. Through continually drawing attention to community priorities and concerns, *What Matters?*, *Flying News* and other Common Service publications have resulted in humanitarian agencies using this information to inform programme decisions. Although many agencies have their own feedback mechanisms in place, practitioners described using *What Matters?* to cross check what they are hearing through their own mechanisms, which then leads them to take action.

Practitioners also use *What Matters?* as evidence when advocating for changes to their own programmes, with partners and at response-wide level. Practitioners gave clear examples of where community feedback published in *What Matters?* supported programmatic change, such as the decision to distribute LPG gas for cooking and providing night lighting in the camps.

This study suggests that *What Matters?* amplifies community voice within the response and that its position as an independent platform, distinct from any of the delivery-focused agencies within the response, makes it more trustworthy and difficult for humanitarian agencies to ignore.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Common Service going forward

Practitioners made suggestions as to how Common Service products and services could be improved. These are incorporated in the following recommendations:

- Continue to make new audio and visual content, but focus on making it more entertaining, rather than just informative, to engage Rohingya people who have now been living in the camps for one and a half years.
- Make audio visual content for specific audiences e.g. Rohingya men on intimate partner violence and women’s empowerment; adolescent girls on menstrual hygiene as well as more content for host communities.
- Content on new topics was also suggested such as trafficking, HIV and more cyclone preparedness content.
- Listening group facilitators are struggling to engage Rohingya people in listening groups without offering incentives and are struggling to find space to hold groups in the camps. The Common Service should continue to consider what are the best models for listening groups, and support agencies to implement new models.
- Improve the search function on the *Shongjog* website so practitioners can search by sector and issue; and carry out user testing to ensure it meets practitioners’ needs.
- Recommendations for the *What Matters?* bulletin:
 - As the Common Service gains access to a bigger range of datasets from different agencies, prioritise breaking down feedback data by camps, to highlight how community concerns differ between camps, and identify where key issues are emerging.
 - In the publication, prioritise numbers and proportions, to give an indication of the scale of issues, as well as graphics to catch people’s eye. This will help draw attention to key issues the community is facing.
 - Consider how to disseminate *What Matters?* more effectively to ensure it is reaching practitioners across the response. Examples could include printing hard copies and presenting key issues at relevant sector meetings; and holding regular *What Matters?* workshops with agencies to debate collectively how community priorities and concerns could be addressed.

Learning about the role of common service projects for future humanitarian responses

Practitioners articulated that they appreciated having a common service in the Rohingya response, to support and enhance the work of humanitarian agencies. The findings from this study suggest the Common Service has added value to the response in the following ways:

- The value of providing an independent feedback system, focused on understanding community priorities and concerns, which is not tied to a particular sector
- The value of being able to produce audio visual content continuously, based on an independent understanding of community needs at any given time
- The value of providing language tools, guidance and training for field practitioners
- The value of providing different tools and services for practitioners operating at different levels within humanitarian agencies
- The value of conducting research at different time points to understand community priorities and ensure things are going in the right direction
- The value of providing bespoke, joint training conducted by a consortium of three different technical agencies, focused on complementary topics of two-way communication, language and terminology guidance, rumour tracking and feedback mechanisms

Appendix

Practitioners who participated in this study worked for the following organisations / sectors:

ACTED
Action Against Hunger (ACF)
American Red Cross
Bengal Creative Media
BRAC
Care International
Centre for Social Integrity
Communicating with Communities (CwC) Working group
Danish Refugee Council
Fondation Hironnelle
International Federation for the Red Cross & Red Crescent (IFRC)
International Organization for Migration (IOM)
Islamic Relief
Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF)
Oxfam
People in Need
Radio Naf
Relief International
Save the Children
Technical Assistance Inc. (TAI)
Terre des Hommes (TDH)
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
World Health Organisation (WHO)